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“Residence at C___”: Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Lisa Robertson

Writing Cambridge

Abstract:

This essay explores the much-neglected late modernist poetry of Veronica Forrest-Thomson and reads it alongside Lisa Robertson’s book-length poem “The Weather,” examining its connection to the city of Cambridge. Reading these works in the context of women writing what is commonly called “Cambridge poetry,” the essay investigates how that intellectual context and the surrounding features of the city are incorporated into the poems. It also considers whether they are, as Robertson suggests of her own work, “site-specific,” through detailed discussion of the architectural and institutional qualities of Cambridge. Overall, it explores how formally innovative texts like these create new conceptual spaces out of existing traditions and structures.

Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s critics have struggled to “place” her challenging late modernist poetry and poetics. Anne Mounic’s *Les tribulations de Persephone* and various anthologies have considered how her work relates to other women writers, while Alison Mark’s *Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Language Poetry* attempts to situate her as a forerunner of North American “language writing.”¹ However, Forrest-Thomson is also said to belong to what has sometimes been called the “Cambridge school,” grouped with writers like J.H. Prynne, John Wilkinson, and Andrew Crozier (Chainey 282, Larrissy 71-72). This essay

suggests another way to read Forrest-Thomson in relation to Cambridge: through the concept of constructed spaces, both intellectual and architectural. Reading her poetry alongside Lisa Robertson's "The Weather" – another Cambridge work which explicitly claims to be "site-specific" – will show how various intellectual and emotional structures are extracted from the environment of the university and the activity of research. Comparative study of Robertson's method, especially considering self-reflexive passages where she uses Forrest-Thomson as a textual source and suggests she sees her as a poetic antecedent, informs this essay's reading of Forrest-Thomson. Ultimately, we will see how both writers' poetic projects have innovative attitudes towards their experience of the places and structures they inhabit.

Often it is useful to group this kind of structuring under the term "architecture," which this essay uses in a variety of ways. It engages with both the idea of architecture as a metaphor, and the idea of architecture as subject matter. These two blend for Forrest-Thomson, in particular, because she finds herself *experiencing* a link between architecture and thought in her life, which she then adapts to the material of poetic metaphor. The experience of being in a place (which includes encounters with its architecture) needs a language to describe it; both Robertson and Forrest-Thomson connect being in Cambridge with the activity of research – Forrest-Thomson's in English literature, and Robertson's in meteorological language. This, in turn, affects their poetic practice, meaning that their surroundings influence the "architecture of a poem" – the way it is constructed. My contention is that these different relationships between the poems and the idea of architecture are inextricable from one another. The work of both Forrest-Thomson and Robertson is, in a new and innovative sense, "site-

specific,” because it draws on the resources of the environment of Cambridge in these diverse ways.

1. Cambridge Contexts

One of the above-noted resources of Cambridge is the branch of avant-garde poetic practice associated with it. This “grounded” and even, in terms of their literary theory, “quasi-conservative” group (Kim-Stefans, “High Artifice”) is one of the more recognizable and talked-about facets of avant-garde or innovative British poetry. Robert Sheppard quotes two prominent commentators: Andrew Duncan placing J. H. Prynne at the center, as well as Charles Bernstein noting their “patrician decorum and Oxbridge authoritativeness” (*Poetry of Saying* 150). However, the relation of the space of Cambridge itself to the poems of members of this nebulously-defined “school” is seldom discussed. Forrest-Thomson is unusual in the group for situating many of her poems in Cambridge, including street names and buildings, which, as we shall see, some critics feel risks excluding or alienating some of her readers. This essay seeks to explore the reasons for Forrest-Thomson’s attachment to that situation, first by putting her work in the context of Cambridge, both School and city, and then broadening this analysis to consider her figuration of intellectual architecture more generally.

This relationship between the poem and the world beyond it became the central concern of Forrest-Thomson’s theoretical book *Poetic Artifice*, which offers a highly determined structure for the reading of a poem, but she also explores the idea through verse. Her first major collection, *Language-Games*, was written while she was a research student at Cambridge; she defines the work (*Collected Poems* 165) as being “about” that specific activity and place. Her

posthumous collection *On the Periphery* continues the same project and retains these imprints. When these poems focus repeatedly on features of her surrounding environment, they become part of the commentary on the “structure” of that experience. For instance, stained-glass windows function variously as metaphors for the way the world is perceived, “colored” by the linguistic and cultural contexts of the observer. Forrest-Thomson’s experience of such architectural features, associating them with a particular Cambridge outlook on the world, informs her poetic artifice, and leads her to choose those features as the basis of a poetic investigation of that outlook.

Lisa Robertson’s *The Weather* has a similarly complex relationship with Cambridge as a venue for research, thought, and poetry. This book-length poem was written while Robertson, a serial holder of “prestigious but impermanent academic positions” (Fitzpatrick and Rudy 174), had a writer’s residency there in 1998-99. She writes in the concluding note that she wanted the work to be “site-specific,” and that it was composed while undertaking “intense yet eccentric research in the study of English meteorological description” (*The Weather* 80). Interspersed with short lyric interludes, subtitled “Residence at C____,” the book consists of seven prose sections (titled with days of the week), which incorporate a range of ways of speaking about the weather. The book makes significant use of Robertson’s research, particularly into meteorological descriptions, which provide both the subject matter for the work, and also the style (repetitious meditation on the same phrases). She names a few titles of sources in her ending note, and specifically mentions beginning with the BBC shipping forecast (*The Weather* 80). However, this research also extends to Cambridge and its writing life, and Forrest-Thomson is an important source for the interlude sections, which

address this more directly. Robertson is trying to situate herself and the poetic practice that will become *The Weather* in a poetic tradition, and Forrest-Thomson is a clear Cambridge antecedent: her book *Language-Games* is “about” doing research in English literature just as Robertson’s is “about” studying meteorological description. The ideas and language of criticism and theory to which Forrest-Thomson devotes her intellectual energies offer raw material to enact the “linguistic possibilities” of form and content, just as the language of the weather does for Robertson.

As well as being specific to the activity of research, Forrest-Thomson, like Robertson, claims that her work is specific to a place and time. The idea of the “site-specific” originates in visual art, but it has relevance to both of these poets. Miwon Kwon writes that site-specific art is a reaction against modernist sculpture that “absorbed its pedestal” (85), but the site-specific often comes “at the cost of a semantic slippage between content and site” (93). This is what leads to Forrest-Thomson’s work being read as overly specific and nostalgic “campus poetry” (discussed below), but we can also read that material as specific means to a general end. Forrest-Thomson has noted that an impersonal poetics, inspired by the New Criticism in which she was so thoroughly schooled, opens up “language-possibilities” that “help others to live their experiences more fully and richly” (quoted in Dowson and Entwistle 158-59). However, her work is so specific to Cambridge itself that, rather than trying to present radical innovatory “possibilities” on a stage of pure language, this attempt is abandoned after earlier works like the sound-poem “Atomic Disintegration” (*CP* 53), whose visual component is a drawing of the letters of the word “atom” being erased by a few lines in each iteration until only dots remain. Robertson’s end note to *The*

Weather describes it, briefly, as site-specific (80), meant in the sense of “the *in situ* configuration of a project” (Kwon 101), whereas for Forrest-Thomson the “phantom of a site” forms part of our identity and “means for survival” (109). In other words, Robertson constructs a work in Cambridge, whereas Forrest-Thomson writes about her intellectual and emotional life, which relies on, and is centered around, Cambridge.

Most often, Forrest-Thomson’s environment is the academic one of Cambridge colleges, leading to it being called “campus poetry” by Drew Milne in his essay “The Art of Wit and the Cambridge Science Park.” Milne writes that such poetry, set in the comfortable environs of the university, is “thankfully an obscure and marginal genre” (175). More usually in the Cambridge School, he says, “[u]niversity referentiality is implicitly taboo,” and his essay offers a detailed analysis of the external contexts used by Cambridge poets and why they are preferred.² Peter Riley sees Forrest-Thomson’s Cambridge settings as either “bold and defiant realism, or a willful disregard for the unknown reader beyond the pale.” However, this dichotomy, like Milne’s essay, overlooks the possibility that it is precisely their (site-)specificity that allows them to present their innovations. As Milne writes, Forrest-Thomson prefigures the development of “a poetics of language-games” by the poets who became known as the “language writers,” mainly in North America. By contrast, the practice of the poetry of J. H. Prynne tends towards “neglecting poetic artifice in favor of an emphasis on poetry as a method of cognition and research” (182). Milne has written elsewhere about these poets’ “embarrassment with direct statement” (“Agoraphobia” 27), an embarrassment intensified when it comes to statements about Cambridge itself. Even poets who do write about Cambridge may try to ignore the university, as in

John James's *Romsey Town*, set far from the stained-glass and libraries of the colleges in a southern district of the city. Forrest-Thomson responds to possibly the same source of embarrassment by shying away from politics, annoyed at the political turn taken by the French literary and theoretical journal *Tel Quel* in the late 1960s, which she comments on in her critical work (*Poetic Artifice* 134). *Tel Quel*, following the mass protests of 1968, responded by making Marxism its "vital productive context" (French 109). Forrest-Thomson refuses to address the changes wrought in the magazine from whose "structuralist, formalist and avant-garde contexts," (108) pre-1968, she drew much inspiration, including the "structuralist" poets she translated from the French, Denis Roche and Marcelin Pleynet. Milne notes this weakness in her work and its "formalist presuppositions of language games which evacuate socio-political resonance" (Milne, "Revisited"). However, while politics may be as "taboo" for Forrest-Thomson as Cambridge is for other poets, her own economic situation does emerge. "[T]he first time I ever set foot in the place," she says of Cambridge in "Strike", "I knew it was my home. The trouble was to convince the authorities." Yet she ends up forced out by economics: "When I sold my rings and stopped buying clothes I knew / it was the end. When I cut down on food it was clear / I was on some kind of quest" (*CP* 134). Forrest-Thomson might read this not as biography but as a formal device, the "artifice" of the quest-narrative. However, as suggested above, the importation of certain worldly contexts here aims at a mediation of the inner life. Cambridge may shut people out, but it is also the place where those who do get in have crucial encounters with these ideas. Although the writers Milne describes find statement "embarrassing," Forrest-Thomson's poetry uses it to report those encounters, but because it is poetry, "reporting" involves more than

just a simple telling but also a figuring – that is, enacting the encounters with language.

Her work displays a relative lack of anxiety about living “from typewriter / to library”; while other poets feel that depicting this life is cause for “embarrassment,” for Forrest-Thomson her own experience of it is precisely what is at issue. On those walks (in the poem “Antiquities”), “the city’s silhouette stands out / just like real” (CP 85), and the walks are only “parenthetical”: in this poem, the only thing that is real is collective knowledge. Despite appearing close to a kind of intellectual solipsism, this stance acknowledges that individual subjectivity is just as unreal as the city: “Glue, paper, scissors, and the library together / paste a mock-up of an individual / history” (86). And then, in the poem’s final line, we are introduced to the possibility that everything that has gone before is only a pose, with a quotation drawn via the Oxford English Dictionary from a 1502 text on prayer: “Such synne is called yronye” (“irony” n. 1a.). In the source, it is an injunction against false humility, and in Forrest-Thomson’s work, it warns the poet to avoid the apparent solipsistic trap of this state of being, while, at least partly, failing to do so itself. The poem, “lacking confidence in the capacity of language to be straightforward,” as Sara Crangle puts it, signposts its own position as part of a heritage of language about language, “a long history of linguistic slipperiness” (Crangle n.p.). Forrest-Thomson says herself that *Language-Games* is “about” the period when she was conducting research on poetry and knowledge for her PhD thesis, and this poem is the expression of the life of a committed scholar who comes to feel that the contents of books are the most “real,” and everything else is questionably relevant, in parenthesis.

When Forrest-Thomson explores these experiences, she is also conscious that they are a woman's experience. In anthologies and discussions of Cambridge poetry, Forrest-Thomson is often the lone female voice, but there are other women writers whose concerns match hers. Milne notes elsewhere that Denise Riley refuses the label of Cambridge poet, but he points out all she has in common with them as well ("Cottage Industries"). Indeed, Linda Kinnahan suggests that women writers, such as Riley and Wendy Mulford, are at the forefront of experimentalism, and that these two in particular are "working at the language-face" in the 1970s (Kinnahan 159). Mulford published Forrest-Thomson's posthumous *On the Periphery* (1976) after approaching her during the inaugural Cambridge Poetry Festival (Mulford, "Forrest-Thomson" 16), as well as multiple books by her friend Denise Riley (Price 184). The term "language-face" is Mulford's ("Notes on Writing" 33), and she uses it to mean "revolutionary practice in the field of the signifier" (32). In the 1970s, she attests, such work was isolated from women readers and read mostly by men, preventing her from participating in a feminist experimentalism, and Forrest-Thomson's work is impacted by this as well. Ian Gregson links Riley and Forrest-Thomson by means of "ontological doubts" (204). Riley, he says, identifies what Forrest-Thomson calls the "smashed self" as, in fact, the reality, especially for "feminine subjects" (205). This is seen in Riley's poem "Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else": "whichever / piece is glimpsed, that is what I am" (quoted in Gregson 205). Similarly, Forrest-Thomson in the poem "Cordelia" claims name after name ("I Helen, I Iseult, I Guenevere", *CP* 156), but in the case of her own name, she offers the pseudonym "Elizabeth Brown" before giving it up: "Well. All right / My name is Veronica Forrest-Thomson." (*CP* 154). This apparently

confessional, autobiographical long poem is actually about the impossibility of direct statement, because any statement by a woman writer is couched in a language not her own: “I speak your tongue in my own city” (157). Although she feels Cambridge is “home” (134), her own city, the language she uses is pulled from whatever resources can be found. “Cordelia,” for example, looks to literary tradition and history (and Robertson carries on that project, as we shall see), but other poems look at other ways of understanding one’s position in the world.

Central to this is the “invention and reinvention of [...] life through artifice” (27), as Forrest-Thomson describes it in her critical book *Poetic Artifice*, but the “artifice” and techniques of poetry are also invented by living one’s life. The project of the book is to elaborate a system of structural elements arranged in “levels” according to which, she says, we ought to read the poem, filtering them through each of these categories in turn. The reader should move from the level of convention (form), through phonology and syntax, and only gradually arrive at the semantic, followed by an overall reading or “naturalization” of the poem. In other words, we must work through the elements of a poem which, with other kinds of language, we usually ignore before we try to decide what it “means” *as a poem*. This, she says, is necessary to ensure that poetry’s unique qualities are apprehended and we do not risk misreading by failing to acknowledge something inherent in, for example, the poem’s lineation (which is a convention), before we try to extract semantic meaning from the words spread out over those lines. The process of poetic reading Forrest-Thomson endorses, and terms “good naturalization,” exists as it does so that we can determine how much of the poem is translatable into other kinds of language, and how it can “be made relevant in a move into an external, non-poetic world” – “life” (*Poetic Artifice* 27). In her own

poems, the use of words' specialized meanings in a given discourse – for instance, the language of architecture, or the “university talk” engaged in by the inhabitants of Cambridge – prevent us from reading them as ordinary language; they become “obscure.” While this does set up a barrier to entry, it also crosses the barriers set up by these specialized languages in their original contexts, fostering unexpected links and felicitous overlap.

Forrest-Thomson's use of artifice to reinvent life experiences particularly applies to the city environment, where poetry identifies new spaces through innovations in ways of seeing. Robertson figures this process in two ways: “frame” and “screen.” In an aphoristic essay on sculpture, she writes: “From its vulnerable perch at the cusp of the polis, ornament perceives” (*Nilling* 54). In this context she is not referring precisely, or solely, to architectural ornamentation, but to a much broader sense of the term: “Often what pleases in vision is contingency held within a frame or screen. I use the word ornament in this way” (51).³ That is to say, any work of art relies on taking something out of its context in the world and place it in an artistic context to some effect. Framing the world pleasingly is the “strength” of poetic artifice, poetry's act of perception. Even then, however, “frame” and “screen” have many possible meanings. They fall within the idea of the “videosoul” that Robertson conceptualizes later in that piece, a “representation that admits uncertainty as part of its structure” and can therefore “improvise knowledge” (54). The frame is the limitation imposed by the form on what is to be shown, and the screen is the equally limited, in fact coterminous, space in which it is viewed. It is notable that “frame” and “screen” are also terms in architecture, and for Forrest-Thomson, the physical, constructed shapes of her Cambridge environment are a crucial resource for metaphorical

representations of the ways we see the world. As in “Antiquities,” poetry must be understood by means of the relationship between its forms and their history; poetry, like Cambridge, is a formal system, “pasted” together like the “pop-up book” of the city (*CP* 85).

2. Alternative Cambridge Spaces

Forrest-Thomson’s and Robertson’s projects have in common the use of the linguistic frame for poetic artifice. Whether it is the language of architecture or weather, they seek to use poetry to establish space for themselves to inhabit. This is signaled in another major overlap between their projects; in one of Robertson’s “Residency” passages, we come across what seems to be a dense group of allusions to Forrest-Thomson’s late work. As Zoë Skoulding notes, “a litany of names significant in feminist history [...] haunts the text” of the section “Tuesday” (*Urban Space* 168), and in the same way Forrest-Thomson comes to haunt this passage. Robertson, through a series of close textual echoes of Forrest-Thomson’s text, places herself in the next literary generation, with Forrest-Thomson cited (albeit subtly) as her own antecedent:

Who’s the king? Not I. Who’s the mother
but the escape of artifice into sunlight
who morphs into anything [...]
who’s fucking Helen, who said Swinburne
was womankind. Possibles
are not the nightingale. (*The Weather* 43)

These last lines refer to Forrest-Thomson's late poem "Cordelia," which contains the lines "It is the lark, my love, and not the nightingale" (*CP* 152-54), an inversion of a line from *Romeo and Juliet*, and ends by encouraging the reader to take advantage of "the possibles [*sic*] of joy" (157).⁴ In further reference to this poem of Forrest-Thomson's, Robertson asks and answers: "Who's / the King? Not I." The search for the King is longer and more frantic in "Cordelia": "I did it, I myself, killing the King my father, / Killing the King my mother, joining the King my brother" (*CP* 156). The family catalogue is part of a strain of psychoanalytic language running through the poem, as it is concerned with the place of a woman writer in the Oedipal literary succession.

In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a complex relationship to literary descent is addressed, and Forrest-Thomson absorbs Eliot into that tradition, while demonstrating anxieties about following him as a woman. Eliot famously conceptualizes literary history as "fragments I have shored against my ruins" (line 431), with what Forrest-Thomson herself calls "the savage irony of [...] simultaneous acceptance of the literary tradition and destruction of it by the brutal contemporary world." (*Poetic Artifice* 48) But, as keenly as Eliot feels this, for Forrest-Thomson he succeeds in ameliorating this destructive effect and continues history into the present. "You must come to terms with T.S. Eliot / If you are doing the twentieth century," begins "Conversation on a Benin Head" (*CP* 126), and the mention of "Girton" in the next line implicitly aligns this with her gender. "Cordelia" is her way of both following Eliot and mocking literary tradition; Forrest-Thomson "deflates" *The Waste Land*'s position with "a series of humorous parodic equivalences" (Farmer, "Triumph of Artifice" 67). Moreover, its tongue-in-cheek title is the name of Lear's dutiful but reticent daughter (Mark

108). Robertson, too, participates in the poetic convention of allusion – particularly popular in modernism and with late modernists like Forrest-Thomson – placing *The Weather* in a literary tradition, which is what prompts us to see “mother” as Robertson’s taking Forrest-Thomson as an antecedent. Forrest-Thomson herself is part of the architecture of Cambridge, and by being there she contributes to its usefulness as a place where new, productive gaps can be discovered.

By writing a book of site-specific experimental poetry, Robertson seeks to innovate a new way of being in a space crowded with history, and so she seeks an antecedent who did the same. The “main” parts of *The Weather*, the seven prose poems named after the days of the week, are manipulations of other kinds of language, poetic adaptations of discourses that attempt to be specific and descriptive. This is much like Forrest-Thomson’s work, which demonstrates a wide range of these adaptations in her chameleonic “language-games,” and so *The Weather* takes her as an antecedent (“mother”) and establishes the connection in the more explanatory “Residence” passages. In particular, Robertson’s phrase “artifice into sunlight” describes the objective of Forrest-Thomson’s project, seeking to illuminate texts by the study of the structure that underpins their reading. A linguistic shape-shifter, she “morphs into anything” by means of her “artifice”, manipulations of different linguistic frames. Other poetic practices would not see the result of artifice as the glorious transformation of linguistic material into the “sunlight” of (to borrow the term from *Poetic Artifice*) a “naturalization” – a reading or understanding of a poem. Rather, such practices, including Robertson’s, believe that it is worth dissolving the boundaries between discourse, since it establishes new spaces for thinking. The project of *The*

Weather is to do just that: meteorology treats the weather as information, but in everyday city life, talking about the weather is talking about nothing. The language-game being played there is, like poetry, not one of giving information, but serving a social function in that it avoids the absence of talk altogether. But Robertson takes this language-game, along with its technical equivalent in meteorology, and works it into poetic language. She seems to model her prose poem, which frequently repeats the same short syntactic structures, on the laconic, grammatically “incomplete” sentences of weather reports. However, while Forrest-Thomson often signposts her literary references in her poems, or gives street names that let us track her route through Cambridge, Robertson does not; even her allusions to Forrest-Thomson go unacknowledged, and “Veronica” is not one of the given names of women writers Robertson scatters throughout “Tuesday.” As such, it is difficult to know which portions of her work are drawn from which conventions of weather-writing. Their telegraphic nature, however, can be connected to the BBC shipping forecast, which she notes as a source at the end of *The Weather*. There, a name for a location, often arcane and little-used outside of this particular forecast, is followed by a shorthand describing conditions. Many passages of *The Weather* operate in much the same way, pairing a weather description with obscure phrases which are not elaborated, as we move on to another. Yet, as in the forecast, the same grammatical structure is repeated again and again, as in this repeated use of a semi-colon to imply, but not determine, a connection between weather and events:

A beautiful day; we go down to the arena. A cold wintry day; we
open some purse. A day is lapsing; some of us light a cigarette. A

deep mist on the surface; the land pulls out. A dull mist comes rolling from the west; this is our imaginary adulthood. A glaze has lifted; it is a delusional space. (*The Weather* 28)

What Indra Singh calls a “shadow grammar” (101), an alternative set of rules of discourse and connections between words enacted by experimental writing practice, we might also think of as a “cloud grammar,” brought about by the ambiguities of Robertson’s laconic, paratactic style. When conventional grammar is absent (or, as in this example, simply of lesser importance), the meanings of her words and sentences shift in a manner comparable to clouds changing their shape. Robertson’s case for the site-specificity of *The Weather* is that the research was carried out in Cambridge and linked to her intellectual and emotional experiences there. In Cambridge, surrounded by all the intellectual apparatus of the university and its historical inhabitants (including Forrest-Thomson), the shape of everyday experience alters and even the weather becomes difficult, governed by an obscure set of rules.

If all that was meant by “setting” a poem in Cambridge was to lend it an atmosphere of academic tradition, then “campus poetry” would indeed deserve to be marginalized. However, poetic approaches to Cambridge can function as critique when they are written from liminal spaces, thereby generating new positions from which to speak, or write. While James’ *Romsey Town* positions itself as being on the wrong side of the city to participate in power – its epigraph: “by the tents, with the women” – Robertson’s poems perform the opposite gesture, carving out a space in a strange city. She does this in *The Weather* by adapting a discourse historically linked to the town, using her time in Cambridge

to work her way into a discourse not available elsewhere. As Skoulding points out in her book *Contemporary Women's Poetry and Urban Space*, Robertson's source is a range of "early meteorological texts, available in Cambridge because of its important role in early natural history." These "are more important to this work than sensory observation, part of a material reality that is textual and historical rather than belonging to the non-human environment" (166). As in Forrest-Thomson's "Antiquities," the poem's "life" – the external world that relates to poetry, however vexatiously – does not all come from love affairs and the countryside, but from reading and the intellectual life as well. This experience is, to use Skoulding's word, as "material" as anything else. The books in which both Forrest-Thomson and Robertson are immersed belong to the built environment: they are held within the university's libraries, which is why this discourse is site-specific. For Forrest-Thomson to make her poems non-specific and in no way tie them to Cambridge would be to suggest that the knowledge she gains could be acquired anywhere, which is untrue. She acknowledges that she views the world through a stained-glass window, that her knowledge of it has come through her educational circumstances. And even in the age of the Internet, Robertson still has to travel to conduct the research she describes, as the rare books she consults may not have been digitized or may reside behind paywalls, to say nothing of the obstacles that many readers might face in getting access to the Internet at all. Yet their projects use artifice to transform languages, which are specific to places like Cambridge because that is where they are held and used, into innovative poetic texts that see the world in new ways. New space comes out of work on old space.

3. Forrest-Thomson's Architectures

Both Forrest-Thomson and Robertson, surrounded by Cambridge's architectural and institutional structures, use them to make sense of their own space, to understand their surroundings in terms of their own lives rather than adopting the existing languages of those places wholesale. Here, I will discuss how architecture affects a grouping of ideas – a drawing of new boundaries – regarding intellectual experience as part of the emotional life these poets depict. I draw on “inner life” as a topic of literary enquiry particularly in the sense of the extended use Julia Briggs makes of it in her study of Virginia Woolf. But whereas Woolf replicates the inner life in narrative (Briggs x *et passim*), Forrest-Thomson and Robertson do it through form. This encompasses (and often focuses on) the emotional life, but it also includes the intellectual life, and the two meet in Forrest-Thomson's work. Architecture figures intellectual structures, and this metaphorical use of space has a reciprocal relationship with the way space is used more generally – a relationship latent in Forrest-Thomson, but more apparent in Robertson.

The image of the window is especially prevalent in her early poems – her 1967 pamphlet *Identikit*, and the unpublished poems leading up to the publication of *Language-Games* in 1971. As the title of that first collection suggests, it is about the building of an identity, and more broadly the constructions of the social world. “I want,” says the title poem, “a picture that simplifies” (CP 16); this desire arises from recognizing the complexity of the way the world actually is. Here windows recur frequently, and while there is no symbolic code straightforward enough to say what they always “stand” for, windows seem to involve situations of uncertainty as to how much of what we see is the world and

how much the thing we see it through. “[I]t’s hard to tell where the light ends / and glass begins” in “The Room” (35), and the “frozen-window sky” in “January Morning” substitutes the human for the natural, along with the “hot ha’penny sun” (13). “I can’t throw stones from castles in the air,” from the poem “Grapes for Grasshoppers” (48), mixes proverbs, exchanging “glass houses” for “castles in the air”; the poem forces us to compare these proverbs, and we ask which is more fragile. In her early work, window and glass are already important for Forrest-Thomson. Indefinite structures such as these manifest anxieties about intellectual certainty. The impressions we garner from these lines in *Identikit* relate to the fragility, or rather the *breakability*, of contingent, human ways of seeing the world.

This seems to acquire an almost serendipitous extra component when she encounters the *stained*-glass windows of Cambridge. From the beginning of Forrest-Thomson’s “Cambridge” poems, written during and after her time living and studying there, the stained-glass window features prominently in her descriptions of the city. The exclusivity this ubiquitous feature of college architecture connotes would not have been lost on Forrest-Thomson, who was a member of the then all-female Girton College, constructed in the nineteenth century from red brick. Girton was built from the beginning to “a grand and dignified scale,” and the resulting building would rival any of the men’s colleges for size and amenities (Vickery 8). However, some of its features, such as the absence of individual staircases to allow students to come and go independently, as well as its distance from the town, were designed to restrict the movement of its students (10-11). The result was a removed and imposing building, designed by Victorian Gothic architect Alfred Waterhouse, one of the major architects of

the day. Waterhouse's buildings, which served and still serve academic and civic functions, traded on the prestige of the mediaeval to lend force to their function in a Victorian society anxious about change. It was Waterhouse's Gothic Victorian building of red-brown brick at what is now the University of Liverpool (incidentally Forrest-Thomson's alma mater) which led to the coining of the term "red-brick university." These British institutions were founded in the nineteenth century in provincial cities, ushering in wide-scale provision of higher education outside of Oxbridge (Coulson 29). Girton predates the Liverpool building but is not on the same scale, and while there are plenty of high, arched windows in Girton, there is not much stained glass. It is in this architectural context that stained glass becomes both a key metapoetic figure and a poetic figuration of how academic studies like theory and philosophy relate to this inner life.

In her poem "The Blue Book," Forrest-Thomson suggests a scene in a Cambridge college – "I have an image of dining with Doctor Dee" – which presents "A context in which we occur / – 'the slightly hysterical style of university talk.'" She then tells us:

The gap between red and green
Is then grammatical;
white objects through colored spectacles.
But though our syntax stains the window-glass,
those stones across the court
assert their tenses
party per fess argent and vert,
party per chevron or and gueules. (*CP* 63)

The first two lines of the above excerpt are a reference to a remark from Wittgenstein's book *Zettel*, and a similar play on this appears in Forrest-Thomson's poem "Zettel" (*CP* 78). Peter Riley writes that these Wittgensteinian poems "inhabit only a narrow band of feeling," but this ignores the effective links she forges between knowledge and the inner life more generally. Forrest-Thomson's work turns the language of a specific field of study into both an innovative aesthetic choice and a roundabout kind of confessionism. Just as confessional poetry aims to reproduce and mediate emotional states of being, so Forrest-Thomson does with intellectual and philosophical crises, which she acknowledges we experience on an emotional level as well. Her poems, as Gareth Farmer writes, "bear the imprint of intellectual and emotional conflict" with "the city, its university and alumni." ("University talk" 161) They show how a student or scholar can spend most of her waking life in a certain conceptual space and find that eventually everything is "shaped like" what she has been studying – in Forrest-Thomson's case, it becomes philosophy-of-language-shaped. Peter Riley's choice of the expression "narrow band" is thus felicitous, since it is the language used to describe a set of wavelengths. For Forrest-Thomson, the language and ideas exchanged in the university only let through a certain wavelength of "light"; only a certain range of aspects of the world. Just as light is filtered through colored glass, the "syntax" of circumlocution (arguably the way one is required to talk in university) restricts the amount of world we see. For Brian Kim-Stefans, Forrest-Thomson's way of reading avoids lending too much weight to any one reading of a poem; a "monologic" criticism would deny the poem's textuality, its status as "shards of grammar arrayed on a page"

(*Fashionable Noise* 69). Kim-Stefans also uses a glass metaphor for language: without thinking about it critically, we experience it as transparent and uninterrupted. However, poetry shows language to be so contingent and breakable that, to read that poetry properly, we must take it as already broken. Poetic language is, at the same time, both a filter for the external world and itself a rarified object of study, although the object of study is only made into a viewable spectacle by the light – the outside world – behind it. To read without thinking about certain qualities of language is to believe that the poem is saying that the world “really is” the way a given mode of language makes it look. The elaborately coded colors of the glass, “party per fess argent and vert,” are the way they are because of historical, political power structures, and refusing to acknowledge that would be to believe that the colors are inherent in the objects seen through the window. As the three stanzas reduce slightly in size to this anaphoric conclusion, our conceptual “spectacles,” colored as they may be, bring the situation into focus. Although we cannot see the world transparently, the poem, foregrounding artifice, acknowledges our view is tinted by the structures of thought traditions and institutions impose.

It is not just the window that Forrest-Thomson uses, however, but architecture more generally, to figure the overlap of emotional and intellectual experiences. We saw, above, how Girton College was designed with two competing aims in mind: to provide a Cambridge education for its female students and to limit their movements and freedoms. It was also mocked by C. S. Lewis as a Gothic extravagance, a version of the Castle of Otranto (Garrett 143). Even without projecting any anxieties about the college’s potential “inauthenticity” onto Forrest-Thomson, it is interesting to look at “The Hyphen,”

her poem for Girton's centenary, which considers both a notable archway in the college called the Hyphen Gate and the figure of the hyphen as both connector and divider. As "the context in which we occur / that teaches us our meaning" (88), the gate is bridging the gap of history, an elementary example of architecture as the source of a metaphor about that complex inner life where the emotional and the intellectual overlap. (Note that the phrase "the context in which we occur" is repeated from "The Blue Book," where the same idea is addressed.) A meditation on a prominent architectural feature of the college turns into a meditation on the idea of history. The poem begins with a dictionary definition of the hyphen:

a short dash or line used to connect
 two words together as a compound
 1869-
 1969
 to connect Chapel Wing and Library.
 But also: to divide
 For etymological or other purpose.
 A gap in stone makes actual
 the paradox of a centenary. (*CP* 88)

The poem features two hyphens, the first being one we see here connecting (and separating) the years 1869 and 1969 over a line-break. The other is between the last two lines of the poem: "the state- / ment of our need to hyphenate." Farmer writes that it is "curious" the poem focuses on the "linguistic implications" of the

event rather than the college's history or social importance as a landmark in women's education ("University talk" 165), but for Forrest-Thomson, linguistic, philological and literary terms and problems underpin everything. They are the means by which she approaches the world and, as in this poem, writing about them allows her to address social and historical issues her complex relationship with Girton, and with its past. The form of the poem, with the hyphens straddling line-breaks, illustrates the message expressed elsewhere in the poem, that hyphens both connect and divide. In a sense, hyphen and break serve the same function, which is the "paradox" of her subject, with architecture bridging form and content. As such, this is not just a case of architecture used as a metaphor for something intellectual. The relationship is, as suggested above, *reciprocal*: we use architectural metaphors to depict our intellectual and emotional experience, but those experiences are also shaped by the way we perceive the space in which we live. There can be physical space around us that still makes it feel as if there is no room for us.

The idea of asserting one's presence poetically in a built space made alien by history, as Robertson and Forrest-Thomson are both doing in Cambridge, is explored through the description of a ruined French abbey in a pair of poems from Forrest-Thomson's posthumously published collection *On the Periphery*, "L'effet du réel" and "An Arbitrary Leaf." In the middle of "L'effet du réel" is a small poem within a poem, in very short lines, far over to the right of the page, and in the last stanza, the speaker asks the addressee, maybe a lover, to stand in the doorway as if modeling for a drawing (CP 110). Anne Mounic describes how this artist confesses herself "confounded" by the moment in which the figure of the other, the admired one, "offers itself without the obstacle of signs as part of

the form of an architecture of presence: ‘The abbey stands still, without quotation marks’” (Mounic 216, my translation). The architectural situation of the scene as poetic object, the frame of ruins in which the silhouette is viewed, allows emotional responses to take place in an environment, rather than in the quotation marks of talk. In the twin poem, “An Arbitrary Leaf,” the abbey is compared to an English church, where Forrest-Thomson voices a caricature of the British tourist: “this would never be allowed in England / such a sudden and insouciant lack of the next step” (111). Although word “arbitrary” in the title has little obvious connection to the text, it does prompt us to read the missing “next step” as a metaphor for problems encountered in thinking, gaps in intellectual architecture. By mocking the idea that an English ruin would not be missing steps, she draws attention to the gaps we find in any historical, traditional mode of thinking.

To pair these two poems in this way is to ask why we are being directed to look at fan-vaulting, which is a feature on the ceilings of churches, right after a poem about writing a poem. At the end of the first stanza, the speaker says, “Give me your hand”; there is an addressee here with her too, put in the position not even of guide but of helper, someone on hand as she picks her way around the decaying structure. The titular leaf is compared to “fan-vaulting discerned / in the abbey – communication having been accepted.” Fan-vaulting, a peculiarly English feature of ceiling design in which ribs “fan” out circularly from the tops of columns, as in Westminster Abbey and Cambridge’s King’s College Chapel, would not be found in a French abbey (Leedy 4) – but we are also told we are *not* in England. However, the term’s juxtaposition with “discerned,” as well as being an imitation of guidebook language, suggests that it is in the eye of the (English)

beholder, and much of aesthetic judgment is made on the pattern of the viewer's own experiences. We adapt unfamiliar spaces to the geometry of our own minds. It is unclear to what that clause after the dash refers, whether communication validates the leaf/abbey correspondence or means the fan-vaulting is discerned, as if it has just been pointed out to her. Although there is no definite meaning to be arrived at here through rational processes, there *is* formal artifice, a metaphorical correspondence whose worth depends on our ability to extract it from a syntactic tangle. In the scheme Forrest-Thomson outlines in *Poetic Artifice*, this would be regarded as not fully integrated, and indeed perhaps not ever integrable, to the "thematic synthesis" of the poem (xiv). However, "communication having been accepted," the message is not what is important, but the way the lines enact, and thus communicate, the play of thoughts in the mind, and their interaction with existing structures of thought.

In this sense, Forrest-Thomson's use of space is a perilous one that "admits uncertainty as part of its structure," to return to Robertson's phrase (*Nilling* 54). We see architectures vanish into "light," which would make no "sense" if we were conducting a literal, ordinary-language reading; even if we were to try to interpret this as a symbolic vision, there is no apparent traditional referent. Rather, their meaning is to be extracted from the so-called "non-meaningful" levels of poetry. Consider the first half of the aforementioned "mini-poem" inside "L'effet du réel," with only about a dozen characters per line:

Until the rock
will turn to
air at a ruin-
ed tower (*CP* 110)⁵

This releases something, not because of the words used, but because of their relationship on the page. They are a small tower where each character looks like a brick in the “ruin- / ed tower”: that break alone shows us that any word can disrupt the functions of thought, that mental processes are happening a syllable or suffix at a time.

In an interview with Sina Queyras, Robertson lists Forrest-Thomson’s name among a litany of writers who have shown that the line-break and caesura “show us the breach as being the active but submerged tradition of a subversion.” This tradition of subversion is what artifice really means to Forrest-Thomson: poetry’s “strength and its defense” (*CP* 167). What is “defended” is the notion that it is just like other forms of language, but the fact that it speaks by means of its departures from monovalent thought means it is worth doing. Even though we are not “told” something through the semantic meaning of sentences, feeling is drawn upon by the way the work is situated formally and syntactically. We can see this in “The Hyphen” and the slim central stanza in “L’effet du reel.” Similarly, the strongest formal elements of *The Weather* are the long series of repetitions of sentence structures. For instance, throughout the book, as we have seen, sentences are divided in two, often by semicolons, and although the relationship between the two sides of the sentence may be unclear at points, the repeated imposition of this grammatical structure introduces a new rhythm of thought. Readings of *The Weather* have tended to draw out metapoetic interpretations that read selected sentences as aphorisms. Rusty Morrison, for example, interprets this line from Robertson’s “Wednesday” section: “Clouded toward the south; we will not be made to mean by a space” (Robertson 30), by suggesting that “space” refers to both the space that the “speaker” is in and the space of the poem (70). However,

as with Forrest-Thomson, a richer reading results from the idea that the division of what the idea of “architecture” is used for in the poem is not so simple as that. Apart from in the “Residence at C ____” interludes, the dominant formal elements of *The Weather* are the semicolon. *The Weather* may be full of such aphorisms and metapoetic comments, but its truly innovative practice functions at the levels Forrest-Thomson would call “non-meaningful.” Some of these are specific to an individual section: “Friday” uses incomplete sentences the way “Wednesday” uses semicolons and “Thursday” begins each sentence with the word “when.” Consider the following example from “Saturday”: “To language, rain. To rain, building” (66). The semantic meaning of this would be unclear (in particular what “to” means) if we did not already have a strong precedent for such constructions being used to advance the thought of the passage. Therefore, if we read this in accordance with Forrest-Thomson’s “levels,” they have a “non-meaningful” function, and one which cannot be reduced to the level of “ordinary” language or an aphorism. So when we read, in “Friday,” a phrase like “We rest on the fringe of a vigorous architecture” (57-58), we might be tempted to interpret it as a comment on the poem. It may well be, but its greatest transformative potential comes from the way such comments are positioned in a sea of often fragmentary text, constantly questioning the possibility of conclusion or statement (or, as in “The Hyphen,” “state- / ment”). As with Forrest-Thomson’s manipulations of syntax and poetic convention, Robertson’s consistent use of nonstandard forms creates out of existing language a field from which new meanings can be drawn.

Conclusion

In her critical work, Forrest-Thomson formulates poetry’s formal characteristics

as its “strength and its defense” (*CP* 167, cf. *Poetic Artifice* 20), allowing (but not requiring) that it reject all meaning except that necessary to speak at all. This has tended to dominate readings of her work and led to it being seen as “too slighting of the truth-functional claims of poetic propositions” (Larrissy 78). As Sheppard has shown, what Forrest-Thomson calls the “non-meaningful” is badly named (“Linguistically Wounded” 142-43), and this terminological confusion has often caused her theory to be misunderstood: the collection of reading strategies she grouped under that heading are in fact about redrawing the boundaries of meaning. Forrest-Thomson’s theory is focused on identifying the “frames,” as Robertson puts it, that we deal with when reading a poem, and both writers challenge these frames in their poetry and attempt to create new ones. They look at established structures of languages and institutions and try to find or make among them the perceptive “ornament” Robertson describes. Although the experimental poetry we have been discussing here, as “ornament”, is confined to a “cusp”, it still sees itself as contributing to a kind of common life. This might be the lineage of writers who have come before, the history of the places where writing and thinking are done, or the project of establishing one’s own space there. The poetic project held in common by Forrest-Thomson and Robertson, and the one which gives both of their work such continuing relevance, is to use poetry to create new spaces in which to think and live.

Notes

¹ These anthologies include *Modern Scottish Women Poets*, edited by Dororthy McMillan and Michel Byrne, and *The Virago Book of Love Poetry*, edited by Wendy Mulford.

² Milne is arguably a member of this “Cambridge School,” and his magazine *Parataxis* (1992-1996) published many of these writers, including key commentary on Forrest-Thomson in the context of other innovative women writers such as Mulford and Riley (Sheppard, *Poetry of Saying* 151; Milne, “Cottage Industries”).

³ There are many other references to “Cordelia” in this section of *The Weather*, such as the names of Helen and Beatrice, who constitute part of Forrest-Thomson’s treatment of the history of women in poetry. Robertson’s line “Provence is cold!” (*The Weather* 43) recalls Forrest-Thomson’s “Out of the sound of the cold / Wind that blows [...] Even Provence knows” (*CP* 153). Finally, Robertson’s “Who said Swinburne / was womankind” recalls Forrest-Thomson’s fondness for and many references to Swinburne, including “Swinburne / Got a kick out of pain but [...] I just get kicked” (*CP* 154). Robertson also challenges Forrest-Thomson’s self-identification with Swinburne, asking rhetorically “who said” this was justified.

⁴ Robertson has written extensively in prose on architecture in her book *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. The relationship of broader concerns of place to her poetry is explored by Ryan Fitzpatrick and Susan Rudy (175 ff.).

⁵ These lines appear in the original text far to the right of the page, which I reproduce here.

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